

The Lion, the Wicked, and the Wonder of it All: Psalm 104 and the Playful God

William P. Brown

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

In the second volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, in the chapter on “The Eternity and Glory of God,” Karl Barth offered the following words of advice to anyone who felt inspired to reflect theologically:

The theologian who has no joy in his [*sic*] work is not a theologian at all. Sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking are intolerable in this science.

Imagine that: the “scientific” work of theology as an exercise of unabashed joy! If theology ever becomes painstakingly tedious, not to mention bland and abstract, then perhaps it is best to give up and do something else . . . or at least take a breather. It is no coincidence that the closest the biblical tradition ever comes to divulging its unapologetically joyous roots is in its evocative poetry. The psalms, for example, testify that the crafting of poetry to communicate the veracity of God’s *hesed* is as playful and joyous as it is serious and sublime. Indeed, the psalmists are not ashamed to dedicate their poetic discourses (or “meditations”) as joy offerings to God: “May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD” (104:34; cf. 19:14).

God’s Joy in Creation

In the case of the great creation “meditation” of the Psalter, Psalm 104, the psalmist regards her hymn as a gift intended to bring pleasure to God. Moreover, such a hymn would have never been offered if the psalmist had not derived pleasure and satisfaction from composing it. This was no offering made in fear and trembling before an unapproachable God; nor was it something the psalmist considered defective or mistaken. No, Psalm 104 was composed with unabashed joy and freedom of expression, and yet it exhibits a theological sophistication scarcely matched by any other psalm. Here, rigorous thinking and rapturous wonder find a compelling convergence. The world, as grand and manifold as it is, is inscribed with coherence and conviviality.

The theme of wondrous joy in Psalm 104 captivates not only the psalmist but also God, or is at least intended to do so. Before offering her “meditation” in thanksgiving, the psalmist makes a remarkable petition:

May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice (*yiśmah*) in his works. (v. 31)

The second half of the verse is highly unusual. Whereas the command to praise (“bless”) God for the bounty of creation is given earlier in the psalm (v. 1), here the psalmist commends *God’s* rejoicing in creation. Such language is rarely attributed to God, for it most often refers to *created* agency “rejoicing” in or before the deity (Pss 9:2; 32:11; 96:11-13; 104:34). Here, however, the reverse applies: the creator rejoices

in creation.

This one verse, or one half of a verse, provides the key rationale for the psalm as a whole. The psalmist dedicates her work to God to help sustain God's delight in creation, to provide sufficient support for God's engagement in the world. The remarkable implication is that God's engagement with creation is more aesthetically than morally driven. The God portrayed in Psalm 104 runs on artistic and altruistic joy, and so does the world. The radicality of such a claim is set in stark relief when compared to another creation (or more accurately re-creation) text, namely, God's covenant with Noah. The covenant comes upon the heels of watery destruction, whose aftermath prompts God to issue of sigh of resignation:

The LORD resolved inwardly, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, because the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done."
(Gen 8:21b)

This evil "inclination" (*yaser*), God realizes, is part of the human makeup, and God has no choice, other than destroying the world entirely, except to accept it. Despite a righteous remnant to begin anew the human race, the human heart remains unchanged in its inclination toward evil. Mostly out of resigned pity, God resolves to set in place a covenantal guarantee that the world will never again be slated for destruction. What follows is a solemn pronouncement that culminates with the sign of the hung bow, a graphic symbol of God's disarmament for the sake of the world. In highly formal language, God solemnly issues a unilateral pledge of restraint as a self-imposed restraining order.

The contrast between priestly covenant and psalmic poetry could not be more sharply drawn. The psalmist replaces the language of solemn covenant-making with poetic pathos. The task of maintaining creation is not by divine restraint but by active giving, not by resignation or pity but by revelry. In Genesis 9, God becomes bound to creation by covenant. In Psalm 104, God freely engages creation in joy. Creation cannot, according to the psalmist, be maintained by divine restraint alone, but by active, providential care, fueled by joy. And there is a necessity to such joy; otherwise, the exhortation in v. 31 would be meaningless. Indeed, the psalmist imbues her exhortation with a sense of urgency. God *could* cease enjoying creation, and were God to do so, the consequences would be as devastating as any judgment.

The Playful God

Fortunately, the psalmist does not dwell on such a frightening possibility. She instead attends to what she sees and hears: brooks babbling, trees growing, birds singing, cattle chewing, lions roaring, people laughing, and Leviathan romping. Yes, God's primordial nemesis is found frolicking in the waters, and it is not alone (v. 26). God is also there splashing away. What the psalmist sees or imagines on the western horizon of the Mediterranean Sea is a remarkable juxtaposition:

There go the ships,
as well as Leviathan, with which you fashioned to play (*lěšaheq*)!

The sea is populated by the products of human ingenuity and divine delight, maritime trade and play. The psalmist *could* have chosen dolphins or flying fish, but the selection of a sea monster is nothing short of startling. This fearsome denizen of the deep is no mere *plaything*, as God reveals to Job:

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
or press down its tongue with a cord? . . .
Will you play with it as with a bird,
or will you put it on leash for your girls?
Will traders bargain over it?
Will they divide it up among the merchants?
Can you fill its skin with harpoons,
or its head with fishing spears?
Lay hands on it; think of the battle;
you will not do it again!
Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed;
were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?
No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
Who can stand before it?
Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who? (Job 41:2, 5-11 [NRSV])

No one, of course, except God. Elsewhere in biblical tradition, fearsome Leviathan is the primordial beast of the sea, the Semitic (and original) version of the multi-headed Hydra, which by necessity had to be destroyed at the outset of creation or at least be destined for destruction “on that day” (e.g., Ps 74:13-14; Isa 27:1). But never in Job do we find God about the task of taming, let alone vanquishing, this chaos monster. Rather, God *boasts* of its fearsome power:

I will not keep silence concerning its limbs,
or its mighty strength, or its splendid frame.
Who can strip off its outer garment?
Who can penetrate its double coat of mail?
Who can open the doors of its face?
There is terror all around its teeth.
Its back is made of shields in rows, shut up closely as with a seal. . . .
Clubs are counted as chaff;
it laughs at the rattle of javelins.
Its underparts are like sharp potsherds;
it spreads itself like a threshing sledge on the mire.
It makes the deep boil like a pot;
it makes the sea like a pot of ointment.
It leaves a shining wake behind it;
one would think the deep to be white-haired.
On earth it has no equal,
a creature without fear.

It surveys everything that is lofty;
it is king over all that are proud. (41:12-15, 26-34 [NRSV])

And God is plenty proud of it! The figure of Leviathan inspires both fascination and dread, the sublime and the dreadful, a terrible beauty. The psalmist retains the fascination but relativizes the terror by pitting God and Leviathan not as mortal enemies but as playmates, roiling the sea together all in the name of fun. Yes, God's enjoyment of creation even extends to this erstwhile enemy.

The Problem with the Wicked

But God's expansive joy evidently stops short with the wicked. The psalm concludes with a petition that "sinners cease from the earth, and the wicked be no more" (v. 35a), understandably omitted in the Common Lectionary reading. Offensive as it might be, this sour note actually saves the psalm from sugarcoated sentiment. Without it, the psalm could be dismissed as simply a romantic, rose-colored view of the world. But with it, the psalmist concludes with a brutal reality-check. Amid the near totalizing goodness of creation there is an acknowledged impediment, associated not with the beasts of the wild or monsters of chaos—they are included fully within the orbit of God's providential care and delight. Rather, the dissonant element is ascribed to human beings, specifically certain human beings deemed "wicked." Who are they? Though unnamed, the "wicked" have a distinct, albeit implicit, profile in the psalm, as elsewhere in the Psalter. At base, they are those who do not share the psalmist's perspectives: first and foremost an awareness of creation's dependence upon God. The wicked deny their feeling of absolute dependence, to borrow from Frederick Schleiermacher's definition of religion. But such renouncement of their dependence on God takes on a malicious twist with the wicked, as two other psalms make vividly clear:

O LORD, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult? . . .
They crush your people, O LORD,
and afflict your heritage.
They kill the widow and the stranger;
they murder the orphan,
and they say, "The LORD does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive." (Psalm 94:3, 5-7 [NRSV])

Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts,
"You will not call us to account"?
But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief,
that you may take it into your hands.
The helpless commit themselves to you;
you have been the helper of the orphan. (Psalm 10:13-14 [NRSV])

By denying their dependence upon God and, in turn, God's power to hold them accountable, the wicked act with impunity as they wreak havoc upon the vulnerable. What the wicked say or think indicates for the psalmist precisely their disposition:

“The LORD does not see” (94:7); “God will not seek it out” (10:4a); “You [i.e., God] will not call us to account” (10:13); “We shall not be moved” (10:6); “There is no God” (10:4b). God is either so limited perceptually as to be oblivious to the criminal activity of the wicked or, for all practical purposes, nonexistent. Hence, the wicked lead lives literally without God, and thereby think they can get away with murder.

From the perspective of Psalm 104, the wicked would be those who do *not* “look to [God] to give them their food in due season” (v. 27). Acknowledging human dependence on God’s sustenance fosters a life of grateful reception of “good things” as gifts, because God, as the psalmist admits, can always close the open hand and hide the face (vv. 28-29). But the wicked do not operate out of such dependence; perhaps they horde rather than gratefully receive; perhaps they take from what others have received from God “in due season”; perhaps they exploit rather than share. In any case, the poet suggests that the wicked, *by being wicked*, threaten to unravel the delicate fabric of creation. They, rather than the monsters of the deep, are the real purveyors of chaos. They operate, by implication, under the cover of night (see Job 24:14-17), the temporal domain of the nocturnal predators (Ps 104:20-23). Thus, the wicked have, by association, turned predator against their own species! And the psalmist feels that her only recourse is to appeal to God for a remedy, namely, their extinction. Such an imprecation may still spoil the psalm for most readers, but its inclusion says something quite profound about how the psalmist views humanity’s place in creation. Through the power of poetry, the psalmist has effectively stripped Leviathan of its menacing guise and transferred the dark mantle upon human beings, and in so doing acknowledges the “banality of evil.” Oliver Hirschbiegel, the director of the highly acclaimed movie, *Downfall*, about the last days of Adolf Hitler, notes that even Hitler and his cronies were “human beings—granted, horrendous, evil, ignorant, and empty—but still human because *we can’t learn from monsters*.”

Humanity’s Place in God’s Playfield

Another remarkable feature of this creation psalm is that human beings are essentially bit players in the unfolding drama of creation: they are not mentioned for thirteen verses, and after that only minimally. Unlike Psalm 8, another psalm of creation, there is no hint of human dominion to be exercised over the animal realm (see 8:6-8). Human beings are interdependently linked with all the other creatures; indeed, dependence upon God is the great equalizer of all the animal species and even the trees (v. 16). All that distinguishes the lion from the human is that the former takes the “night shift” while the latter works during the day (104:21-23).

The God of Psalm 104 revels in the care and feeding of all creatures, a labor of love, and the psalmist wants to ensure that God’s way in the world will always be so, hence, her offering of this eloquent “meditation,” itself a labor of love (v. 34). And such an offering is distinctly ecological, for she has inscribed the world as an ordered plurality, a world of wonder, the LORD’s playfield, in which Leviathan is but one example of God’s enchantment with the world. As wine serves to “gladden the human heart” (v. 15a), so God savors creation, not as its consumer but as its provider. And as the drama of such blessing continues into the gospel, God faces the human impediment to creation’s goodness head on, and death is the result, but not that of “sinners.” God’s “joy to the world” trumps even sin and death; it was for “the joy that was set before him” that Jesus endured the cross, “disregarding its shame” (Heb 12:2).

In light of the cross, the psalmist's point still pertains: there are those who refuse to play and therefore refuse to remain in the game or play by the rules. Call them quitters or cheaters, although the psalmist has chosen much harsher language. But then there are those who, like God, delight in creation's diversity and abundant provision. They, like the psalmist, engage in play not out of fear that God may quit playing at some point, but out of the assurance that God's joyous commitment to life-giving play is, as confirmed in Christ, everlasting.

Notes

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 ("The Doctrine of God"), eds. G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 656. Drawing from Anselm's treatise *Cur Deus homo*, Barth claims that any theological proof is "in itself a *delectatio*" (Ibid., 657).
2. Joy, and the aesthetic qualities it cultivates, is what makes theology, according to Barth, a "particularly beautiful science" (Ibid., 656).
3. With the exception of Isa 9:17, which is textually suspect, the verb *šmḥ* ("rejoice" or "be joyful") nowhere else in the Hebrew canon has God as its subject (see Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* [FOTL 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 225). Related verbs *ḥps* ("to delight") and *ršh* ("to be pleased"), however, are applied to God, particularly in contexts of sacrifice and moral integrity (e.g., Pss 5:4; 18:19; 35:27; 37:23; 40:13; 41:11; 51:16, 19; 147:10). Nevertheless, the verb "rejoice" signals a more heightened, intensified level of emotion. The closest parallel to the psalm is found in Zeph 3:17 ("[YHWH] will rejoice over you with gladness").
4. This suggestion comes from Marilynne Robinson's wonderful novel *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004), 124.
5. Author's translation.
6. Cf. the following verse, which highlights God's capacity to destroy.
7. Author's translation. The syntax is ambiguous, given the possible antecedents for the suffixed preposition *bō*. Thus, the text could be translated: "... Leviathan, which you fashioned to play in it [i.e., the sea]." But this possibility is less likely given the closer proximity of "Leviathan" in the verse. "Sea" is attested in the previous verse.
8. Calvin thought Leviathan was a whale, but it seems to have closer affinities to the crocodile (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, volume 4, trans. James Anderson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949], 165). In any case, the figure is drawn mythically larger than life as a chaos monster.
9. Richard Cohen, "A Chilling Look at German People," op-ed, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 28 April 2005, A17 (italics added).